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ABSTRACT

Political and social issues surrounding the evaluation of a campus learning center are examined and discussed. Issues with which the program evaluator should be aware when attempting to objectively evaluate special service programs for minorities are outlined. Special emphasis is placed on methodology and skills needed to select, as well as collect, essential information for program improvement. In addition, the following specific characteristics necessary to be a "culturally skilled evaluator" are outlined: (1) an awareness of his or her own values and bias and how they may affect objectivity and judgment of a program; (2) a good understanding of the sociopolitical system's operation in the United States with respect to its treatment of minorities; (3) a possession of specific knowledge and information about the particular groups he/she is working with; (4) a sensitivity to personal biases and sociopolitical influences which may necessitate referral of an evaluation to a member of a minority culture; and (5) a clear and explicit knowledge and understanding of the generic characteristic of program evaluation. (Author/RL)

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ISSUES INVOLVED IN EVALUATING SPECIAL PROGRAMS FOR MINORITIES:
(A case in point--evluation of a campus learning center)

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(Abstract)

many colleges and universities around the country have developed special service programs with the intentions of assisting minority students to become better prepared to meet the university's academic standards and successfully attain thier educational goals. Social and political pressures have augmented awareness of the need for special programs for minorities. However, some programs are in serious trouble because of budget cut, time restraints, poor planning, and the lack of sufficient accountability procedures. Program administrators in general are increasingly "under the gun" of accountability. Therefore, they have come to realize that evaluation is a major priority if minority education is to continue to exists and improve.

Several controversial issues are involved with the evaluation of special programs for minorities. The following questions are frequently posed by program administrators: 1) Who is to do the evaluation? 2) Are the programs effectively and efficiently meeting the needs of the students whom they were designed? 3) How can programs be improved? While these and other questions are often raised, they are frequently difficult for the evaluator to answer objectively in a politically and/or socially bias setting. The main objective of this paper is to briefly examine and discuss political and social issues surrounding the evaluation of a campus learning center. Specifically, this paper focuses on issues which the program evaluator should be aware of when attempting to objectively evaluate special service programs for minorities.

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Special emphasis is placed on methodology and skills which should enable the evaluator to select, as well as collect essential information for program improvement. In addition, specific characteristics are outlined which describe the "culturally skilled evaluator."

ISSUES INVOLVED IN EVALUATING SPECIAL PROGRAMS FOR MINORITIES:
(A case in point--evaluation of a campus learning center)

by-

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ISSUES INVOLVED IN EVALUATING SPECIAL PROGRAMS FOR MINORITIES: (A case in point--evaluation of a campus learning center)

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This paper which has four sections, focuses on political and social issues surrounding the evaluation of a campus learning center. The first section examines the need for special service programs, as well as the need for their evaluation. Section two discusses and describes issues involved in evaluating special programs for minority students. The third section specifically describes some benefits of employing reversal techniques in evaluating such programs, and section four, outlines specific characteristics for the "culturally skilled evaluator." The issues identified in this paper emphasize the complexity involved in evaluating a program within a potentially political environment, and suggest ways in which the evaluator can become more sensitive to the political implication of his or her activities.

Need for Special Service Programs

There is an ongoing need for the continuation of special service programs for minorities, given the characteristics of most minorities. In general, minority students tend to come from urban, low-income families and to have below average scholastic aptitude, as indicated by conventional test measures. Therefore minority students have more than just academic adjustments to make: social as well as financial worries are of great importance and need attention. It is inevitable that eventually there will be pressure from different sources to assess the value of these programs.

During the late sixties and early seventies, many colleges and universities developed special services programs for assisting minority students to become better prepared to meet the university's academic

standards and successfully attain their educational goals (Braskamp & Brown, 1972). Social and political pressures have augmented awareness of the need for special services programs for minorities. However, some programs are in serious trouble because of budget cuts, time restraints, poor planning, and the lack of sufficient accountability procedures. Program administrators in general are increasingly "under the gun" of accountability.

Top management is no longer willing to allocate scarce resource to special service programs that fail to show or have never been shown to produce their intended effects. Since many funding sources not only recommend, but require systematic accountability procedures for program justification and for refunding, each program component must demonstrate purpose of function and program effectiveness. Program managers now realize that evaluation must be a major priority, if these special services programs are to continue to exist and improve.

Definition and Purpose of Evaluation

Evaluation can be defined as the process of gathering, organizing and using information for decision-making about programs. The information collected includes systematic descriptions of events, outcomes, and effects of a program. While most authors agree on this definition, in practice, evaluation is sometimes undertaken for somewhat different reasons. For example, program decision-makers may turn to evaluation to delay a decision; to justify and legitimate a decision already made; to extricate themselves from controversy about future directions by passing the buck; to satify conditions of a government or foundation grant; and to vindicate the program in the eyes of its constituents,

its funders, or the public (Weiss, 1972).

Evaluation is a subjective undertaking involving values, frames of reference, and questions of utility and social usefulness, when it is honestly and systematically conducted. Selection of relevant empirical information used systematically, seems to be a better basis for decision-making than no information at all or information collected sporadically (Braskamp & Brown, 1972 have elaborated on this point). There is one sense in which any educational evaluation ought to be regarded as political. Evaluation is a mechanism whereby the worth of a program can be judge, explored and expressed. Therefore any judgment on the nature of the program or results collected has at least a potential political impact--it can contribute to changing power relationships.

Evaluation of Special Service Programs

Several controversial issues are involved with the evaluation of special services programs for minorities. The following questions are frequently posed by program constituents, community supporters, program managers and program staff: 1) Who is to do the evaluation? 2) Are the programs effectively and efficiently meeting the needs of the students whom they were designed? 3) How can programs be improved? These questions are difficult for the evaluator to answer objectively in a politically and/or socially biased setting. For example, there is a need for the evaluator to properly identify the target population to be served by the program. He or she may pursue this issue by examining the views of the program manager, as well as the director, program staff, and other persons associated with the program. Problems arise when the evaluator is faced with conflicting descriptions from managers

and staff personnel, who have their own operational definition and criteria for the target population.

Political Naivete and Evaluation

While evaluators should continue to gather knowledge, history suggests that such knowledge is applied only when the political conditions are ripe. The evaluator may be in a position to torpedo innovative programs which lack popular support, but will have no luck shooting down established programs (Weiss, 1970). Under these circumstances an evaluator would be wise to weigh the implications of his or her findings (recommendations, conclusions, etc.) for the existing, as well as future projects. If the evaluation arena is a political one, the evaluator must consider this when deciding what data to collect and how to present conclusions. Evaluators must be sensitive to the political implication of their activities. There may be times when one should vigorously criticize a program, and other times when a new program or project needs support. Many people believe that most evaluators can evaluate a program or project independently because they are free of any pressures that would influence their decisions. Obviously, it is naive to overlook the pressures on evaluators and the pressures which their finding can generate for others.

Evaluation of a campus learning center is a good example of a politically volatile situation. Criteria which are currently used for assessment of learning centers are often inappropriate and inadequate for the dynamics of the situation (Maxwell, 1979). Goodwill and cooperation among evaluators, staff personnel and the community may be more important over time than the blunt facts.

Issues Involved In Evaluating Special Programs

There are several issues which can be directly associated with the evaluation of special service programs for minorities. The following are key issues for consideration: 1) Who is to do the evaluation? 2) Does the evaluator have to be a minority person? 3) Should the evaluator be sensitive to the changing needs of program participants? 4) What kind of knowledge should the evaluator possess concerning the historical nature of the program to be evaluated? Consideration of these issues allows to realize the complexity involved in the evaluation of special services programs in general, and the political context which the evaluation is to be performed, in particular.

In reference to the question, "Who is to do the evaluation?" The evaluator should be an individual who is sensitive to the needs and concerns of program participants as well as, someone who is concerned about gathering and reporting information in an objective manner. The evaluator should have a clear knowledge and understanding of generic characteristics of program evaluation. He or she should perceive evaluation as a process, rather than an event, but this emphasis should not prevent the evaluator from being objective, pragmatic, and understanding of immediate social and political conditions surrounding the evaluation of special programs for minorities.

The evaluator of a special service program does not have to be a minority person. However, it is important to recognize that many special services programs--i.e. (learning centers) have been created to meet the diverse learning needs of minority students and to assist these students to achieve their educational goals, but the evaluators of these programs are often white individuals who may not be sensitive

enough to the changing needs of the program participants. This is most often a potential problem for white evaluators who are not culturally skilled in the performance of evaluation when it involves the evaluation of programs designed for minorties.

A crucial function in the implementation and ongoing function of evaluation is providing useful feedback. This can be problematic given the time required to produce sufficient change. The evaluator should be sensitive to the changing needs of the program participants in order to provide useful feedback, which will reflect the current needs of the program participants. It is also important to recognize that implementing special services programs for minorities sometimes allows little time to examine systematically actual events. Therefore, the evaluator should plan the evaluation well; he or she should provide a comprehensive description of the program, considering unplanned activities, events, and outcomes. Ultimately, the evaluator's sensitivity to the changing needs of program participants will undoubtedly influence the findings, which will contribute in turn to the overall decision-making process.

The evaluator should be cognizant of historical events which have lead to the development and implementation of the program to be evaluated. This information can be very useful in allowing the evaluator to better understand what potential political issues may be involved or associated with the evaluation of the program. An awareness of events leading to the creation of a program can also prepare the evaluator for the political climate which currently surrounds the evaluation to be performed. In addition, such information gathered before the evaluation can alert the evaluator to weigh the implications of his or her

recommendations and conclusions.

Another issue of importance when evaluating a special service program such as a campus learning center is the identification of the target population to be served. Initially, this may not appear to be an issue of importance to the evaluator. However, it can rapidly become one if the evaluator discovers that the program manager, director, and other persons associated with the program have conflicting descriptions as to the identity of the population to be served. The discussion to follow is a description of such a issue which took place when an evaluator was called to determined ways in which the Educational Learning Center at the University of Nebraska could be improved based on the existing organizational structure, operating procedures, and staff personnel. Therefore, the type of evaluation requested was formative in nature.

Identifying The Target Population

The first program objective described in the learning center's mission statement read, "To contact minority and educationally disadvantaged students to inform them about the center's programs, services, and activities." After reading this statement which had been jointly produced by program staff members and approved by the program manager, the evaluator determined that it was unclear just who was the population to be served. While minority and disadvantaged students were identified, the mission statement provided no criteria for what constituted a "minority" or "disadvantaged" student. Thus, any student wishing to receive services from the center's staff could do so. Therefore, the evaluator's initial task involved discvering what students

were actually using the services provided by the center.

It should be noted that there are some serious problems which can arise from failure to properly identify a target population to be served. One problem is particular which this program experienced was an overcrowding of the center's facilities, as well as an overloading of staff personnel. In the final analyses, this meant that either the target population would have to be more narrowly defined or that the immediate staff would have to be increased to meet the growing demands of students who visited the center. However, this latter alternative was not a very plausible one, in as much as program funds were limited and would probably be cut the ensuing year.

In an effort to determine what students were using the center, the evaluator made daily visits to observe first hand, who came into the center. It should be noted that visits were made periodically at various times during the day. This procedure was repeated for ten days. While most of the student who visited the center needed assistance, the evaluator discovered that an estimated percentage of the students who came in during the observation period were foreign students attending the university, rather than disadvantaged American minorities--i.e. (Blacks, Chicanos, and Native Americans). In actuality, the percentage of both Black, Chicanos, and Native American students (combined) was proportional to the number of foreign students taking advantage of the center's services. Because the center was funded from state sources, any enrolled student at the university was eligible to use its services. To discriminate against any student in terms of denying program services would be a violation of funding purpose. In a sense, the target population had been defined by the funding source.

After careful consideration, this issue was brought to the attention of the director of the program and the program manager. Specifically, both persons were asked to leek once more at the mission statement, as well as the program objectives, to make sure each was aware of what had been stated. Next, the evaluator reported findings from initial observations at the center to both the director and program manager. In addition, there was specific mention of the funding source and the guidelines specified by that source. One assumption which the evaluator made was that the program staff and program manager had clear and open lines of communication. As it turned out, this proved to be an unsafe assumption and the evaluator found himself in the midst of a political arena.

As a result of this discussion, the program manager had no idea as to what was taking place at the center, other than what was printed on the pages before him. He indicated his disapproval rather openly to the director that "minority" and "disadvantaged" students were to be given the primary priority in terms of receiving services at the center. It is interesting to note that the program manager employed his own operational definition at this point. His interpretation of this statement was that only recognized disadvantaged minority students--e.g. Blacks, Chicanos, and Native Americans who were U.S. citizens, should be taking advantage of the services provided. On the contrary, the program director interpreted the mission statement to not only include these groups, but also foreign students attending the university. She supported her point with the guidelines of the funding source. The program manager, on the other hand, supported his statement with the fact that while the center was funded through state sources, the staff personnel

were being paid with federal funds with the stipulation that these funds be used to implement the quality of minority education by offering special help to U.S. minorities.

It is important to note that the evaluator found it diffcult to offer advice which the program manager and director would find compromising and useful, in order to deal effectively with this issue. However, several suggestions were proposed and considered as possible solutions to this problem. It became somewhat obvious that if the target population could be defined operationally to satisfy the conditions of funding sources, as well as personnel staff members and administrators, the program could be improved upon, even if program services were merely adequate.

While there were other political issues associated with this particular evaluation, this example of an issues serves to illustrate three important points in particular: 1) The evaluator must be aware of the political arena that exists whenever and wherever he or she engages in the process of evaluation; 2) The evaluator must realize that mere collection of data does not constitute evaluation; 3) It is insufficient to speak of evaluation only in terms of whether or not objectives are achieved, but rather how well they are achieved. It is equally important to pay attention to the orgins of the program objectives.

Evaluating Special Program Through The Reversal Technique

According to Maxwell (1979), the reason for the evaluation dictates the most effective design and the kinds of data to be collected. Several models have been proposed by a number of evaluators that can be used to evaluate educational materials and products. Among these are

models put forth by Bloom and others (1971), Scriven (1974), Popham (1975), and Stake (1975) to mention just a few. While it is almost blasphemous to criticize inferential statistics today, the fact remains that there are some definite limitations to a statistical group-comparison approach to evaluation. According to Hersen and Barlow (1976), the major criticisms presented against this approach to evaluation can be categorized into five areas. Briefly summarized, they are:

Ethical Objectives--By withholding the treatment from the control group in an experimental evaluation, they may be cheated or actually harmed. In evaluating special programs, those who do rot receive training or the effects of the program may suffer in terms of performance.

Practical Problems--Developing the sophisticated statistical procedures in use today, R.A. Fisher in the 1930s was able to establish perfectly matched, randomly selected control groups for his work in plant genetics. To a lesser degree, the same is true with the experimental work done in psychology with animal and college sophomore subjects. Unfortunately, such luxuries for determining control groups in evaluating special service programs are seldom, if ever possible.

Averaging of Results--A problem which is often overlooked is the dependence on the "average" in group comparisons. As Hersen and Barlow (1976) note:

> If nature were "striving" to produce the average man, but failed due to various accidents, then the average, in this view, was obviously the ideal. Where nature failed, however, man could pick up the pieces, account for the errors, and estimate the average man through statistical techniques (p. 5.)

The averaging approach, basically assumes that variablility or error can be accounted for or averaged out in a group. The irony of this is that there is no such thing as an average person. It has been noted by famous social psychologist Kurt Lewin (1933) and reported by Luthans (1979), "the only situations which should be grouped for statistical treatment are those which have for the individual rats or for the individual (human subjects) the same psychological structure and only for such period of time as this structure exists."

Generality of Findings: If the evaluator or personnel practitioner concludes on the basis of group improvement that a program is effective, it is still difficult to say how an individual employee or student will react. Therefore, it becomes difficult to generalize beyond the group, or more specifically, beyond the nonexistent "average" member of the group.

Intersubject Variability: The fifth major category of problem with between-group statistical comparisons is that of intersubject variability. Although the statistical procedures attempt to account for the problem of variability between subjects, the within-subject variability is ignored.

It should be noted that the five points which have been summarized are not intended to detract from the value of using inferential statistics to analyze data in program evaluations. On the contrary, the purpose is to simply remind the evaluator of the limitations and propose an alternative design that does not require the use of this type of analysis.

Many evaluators continue to rely heavily on quickly assembled questionnaires that simply get the reaction of those involved on whether they liked the program and think it will be useful. What is needed is an

evaluation technique that yields valid cause-and-effect conclusions, but is easy to use and does not require the sophisticated or mysterious craft of research and statistical methodology. The reversal, or ABAB, technique may meet this need.

The Reversal Technique Defined

Reversals have been an effective evaluation tool in the fields of education, psychology and mental health for a number of years (Hersen & Barlow, 1976). The technique basically involves the following four steps, applied in the following case to a writing skills program.

Step #1. A measure of the variable under conderation (e.g., correct punctuation usage) is taken under existing baseline conditions (A).

Step #2. Next, the intervention is applied. This could be any type of tutoring program, designed to improve the quality of punctuation usage in writing--this is considered the intervention strategy (B).

Step #3. In this step, a reversal is attempted. The tutoring program is withdrawn. There is a return to baseline conditions (A).

Step #4. After the measured variable in step 3 has stabilized under the baseline conditions, the tutoring program is reintroduced (B). The reversal effect must be evident at this point for the technique to show that the program caused the change in the measured variable (punctuation usage), and not some extraneous variable. The whole ABAB process can then be repeated to strengthen the conclusions.

Strengths of the Reversal Technique

An advantage of reversals is that the participants in the program serve as their own controls. Thus, the problem of intersubject variability which is inherent in control-group experimental designs is eliminated. The practical problem of obtaining a randomly selected,

matched control group in an organizational setting is also eliminated. In addition, the reversal measures up quite well with respect to established criteria for internal validity (Campbell & Stanley, 1963).

Potential Weaknesses

Perhaps the greatest weakness of a reversal technique is that it assumes that the dependent variables are transient. In other words, it assumes that the changes that occurred from the intervention are capable of being reversed when there is a return to baseline conditions. There is, of course, also the practical consideration of reversing a desirable change back to the baseline level. There are also some potential problems with external validity. Evaluation experts suggest that results obtained from a reversal design can only be generalized to include other subjects exposed to a similar sequence of events (Campbell and Stanley, 1963, p. 44). Like any technique used for evaluation, control of the variables may be difficult to maintain.

Summary

While reversals are certainly not a panacea for accountability and evaluation, they can be a highly useful tool for the program evaluator, especially those who wish to show cause-and effect relations. The beauty of reversals is that they have an internal validity which allows for sound cause-and effect conclusions, but they do not require unrealistic experimental designs and sophisticated statistical analysis of the data. Further strengths and weakness of this design are fully discussed elsewhere, Luthans and Bond (1977) and Campbell and Stanley (1963).

Evaluation is a complex and difficult process, and the evaluation of a

special service program for minorities is no exception. There are numerous issues surrounding the evaluation of special program, but perhaps one of the most important is the selection of the person who is to make judgments on the worth of the program, regardless of the adequacy of the evaluation theory, model, or methodology to be employed. The main purpose for the evaluation of special programs for minorities should be to provide the best total environment for the student. Therefore, the evaluator must possesscertain skills which will enable him or her to make meaningful and accurate judgments of these programs.

Characteristics of the Culturally Skilled Evaluator

The following list of characteristics have been developed to assist in the training of recruits into the profession of evaluation; specifically, in the process of evaluating special programs for minorities. It is hoped that this effort will facilitate and increase the numbers being trained to perform the role of an evaluator under a variety of social and political conditions involved in the evaluation of a special program for minorities.

1. *The Culturally Skilled Evaluator*--is aware of his or her own values and bias and how they may affect objectivity and judgment of a program.
   a. They try not to hold preconceived limitations of a program.
   b. As a check upon the process, culturally skilled evaluators monitor their functioning via consultation and continual education.
2. *The Culturally Skilled Evaluator*--will have a good understanding of the sociopolitical system's operation in the United States with respect to its treatment of minorities.
3. *The Culturally Skilled Evaluator*--must possess specific knowledge and information about the particular group he/she is

working with.

a. Specifically, the evaluator is one who continues to explore and learn about issues related to minority groups throughout his or her professional career.

4. *The Culturally Skilled Evaluator*--is sensitive to circumstances (personal biases and sociopolitical influences) which may necessitate referral of an evaluation to a member of a minority culture.

5. *The Culturally Skilled Evaluator*--must have a clear and explicit knowledge adn understanding of generic characteristic of program evaluation.

Discussion and Conclusions

This paper has attempted to examine and discuss some potential political issues which impact on the evaluation of special programs for minorities. It is important to remember that the evaluation will be surrounded by a specific political climate and it is the responsibility of the evaluator to present his or her findings in a suitable fashion (one that can co-exists with the political climate) and when the sociopolitical climate is ripe. Thus, it is important for the evaluator to not only have specific and use ful evaluation skills, but also the ability to perceive the impact of his or her findings on the political atomsphere surrounding the program, as well as the impact these findings may have on the continuation of the program. It has been noted that the evaluator of special programs for minorities should posses certain cultural skills, which will allow him or her to be cognizant of personal bias which they carry into the program evaluation.

While evaluation is primarily performed for the purpose of making decisions about the worth of a program, it is most important that an evaluator remember that the "sophisticated evaluator" is always aware

of the many problems and the needed subjective judgments made during the evaluation process. Although special programs have been established for minorities, it is necessary to note that if these programs are continue to exist and improve, there is a need for more effective, politically aware, and culturally skilled evaluators to assume a greater responsibility in the evaluation of such programs.

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